CHAPTER XI.

I Receive a Call.

Going to bed at three o'clock on a winter morning in a house whose ways are disquieting, after a duel in which you escaped whole only by sheer good luck, does not fit one for sleep. When I finally drew the covers over me it was to lie and speculate upon the events of the night in connection with the history of the few weeks I had spent at Glenarm. Larry had suggested in New York that Pickering was playing some deep game, and I, myself, could not accept Pickering's statement that my grandfather's large fortune had proved to be a myth. If Pickering had not stolen or dissipated it, where was it concealed? Morgan was undoubtedly looking for something of value or he would not risk his life in the business; and it was quite possible that he was employed by Pickering to search for hidden property. This idea took strong hold of me, the more readily, I fear, since I had alwaye been axious to see evil in Pickering. There was, to be sure, the unknown alternative heir, but neither she nor Sister Theresa was, I imagined, a person capable of hiring an assassin to kill me.

On reflection I dismissed the idea of appealing to the county authorities, and I never regretted that resolution. The seat of Wabana county was 20 miles away, the processes of law were unfamiliar, and I wished to avoid publicity. Morgan might, of course, have been easily disposed of by an appeal to the Annandale constable, but now that I suspected Pickering of treachery the caretaker's importance dwindled. I had wanted all my life for a chance at Arthur Pickering, and in this affair I hoped to draw him into the open and settle with him.

I slept presently but woke at my usual hour, and after a tub felt ready for another day. Bates served me, as usual, a breakfast that gave a fair aspect to the morning. I was alert for any sign of perturbation in him; but I had already decided that I might as well look for emotion in a stone wall as in this placid, colorless serving man. I had no reason to suspect him of complicity in the night's affair, but I had no faith in him, and merely waited until he should show his hand.

By my plate next morning I found this note, written in a clear, bold, woman's hand:

"The Sisters of St. Agatha trust that the intrusion upon his grounds by Miss Armstrong, one of their students, has caused Mr. Glenarm no annoyance. The Sisters beg that this infraction of their discipline will be overlooked, and they assure Mr. Glenarm that it will not recur."

An unnecessary apology! The note paper was of the best quality. At the head of the page "St. Agatha's, Annandale" was embossed in purple. One of the sisters I had seen beyond the wall undoubtedly wrote it—possibly Sister Theresa herself. A clever woman, that! Thoroughly capable of plucking money from guileless old gentlemen! Poor Olivia! born for freedom, but doomed to a pent-up existence with a lot of nuns! I resolved to send her a box of candy sometime just to annoy her guardians. Then my own affairs claimed attention.

"Bates," I asked, "do you know what Mr. Glenarm did with the plans for this house?"

He started slightly. I should not have noticed it if I had not been so keen for his answer.

"No, sir. I can't put my hand upon them, sir."

"That's all very well, Bates, but you didn't answer my question. Do you know where they are? I'll put my hand on them if you will kindly tell me where they're kept."

"I fear very much, Mr. Glenarm, that they have been destroyed. I tried to find them before you came, to tell you the whole truth, sir; but they must have been put out of the way."

"That's very interesting, Bates. Will you kindly tell me whom you suspect of destroying them? The toast again, please."

His hand shook as he passed the plate.

"I hardly like to say, sir, when it's only a suspicion."

"Of course I shouldn't ask you to incriminate yourself, but I'll have to insist on my question. It may have occurred to you, Bates, that in a sense—in a sense, mind you—I'm the master here."

"Well, I should say, if you press me—that I fear Mr. Glenarm, your grandfather, burned the plans when he left here the last time. I hope you will pardon me, sir, for seeming to reflect upon him."

"Reflect upon the devil! What was his idea, do you suppose?"

"I think, sir, if you will pardon—"

"Don't be so fussy!" I snapped. "Damn your pardon, and go on!"

"He wanted you to study out the place for yourself, sir. It was dear to his heart, this house. He set his heart upon having you enjoy it—"

"I like the word—go ahead."

"And I suppose there are things about it that he wished you to learn for yourself."

"You know them, of course, and are watching me when I'm hot and cold, watching me to see when I'm hot and cold, like kids at a child's game."

The fellow turned and faced me across the table.

"Mr. Glenarm, as I hope God may be merciful to me in the last judgment, I don't know any more about it than you do."

"You were here with Mr. Glenarm all the time he was building the house, but you never saw walls built that weren't what they appeared to be, or doors made that didn't lead anywhere."

I summoned all my irony and contempt for this arraignment. He lifted his hand as though making oath.

"As God sees me, that is all true. I was here to care for the dead master's comfort and not to spy on him, sir."

"And Morgan, your friend, what about him?"

"I wish I knew, sir."

"I wish to the devil you did," and I flung out of the room and into the library.

At 11 o'clock I heard a pounding at the great front door and Bates came to announce a caller, who was now stamping the snow from his shoes audibly in the outer hall.

"The Reverend Paul Stoddard, sir."

The chaplain of St. Agatha's was a big fellow, as I had remarked on the occasion of his interview with Olivia Gladys Armstrong by the wall. His light brown hair was close-cut; his smooth shaven face was bright with the freshness of youth. Here was a sturdy young apostle without frills, but with a vigorous grip that left my hand tingling. His voice was deep and musical—a voice that suggested sincerity and inspired confidence.

"I'm afraid I haven't been neighborly, Mr. Glenarm. I was called away from home a few days ago after I heard of your arrival, and I have just got back. I blew in yesterday with the snow storm."

He folded his arms easily and looked at me with cheerful directness, as though politely speculating as to what manner of man I might be.

"It was a fine storm; I got a great day out of it," I said. "An Indiana snow storm is something I have never experienced before."

"This is my second winter. I came out here because I wished to do some reading and thought I'd rather do it alone in a university."

"Studious habits are rather forced on one out here, I should say. In my own case my course of reading is all cut out for me."

"The Glenarm collection is famous—the best in the country, easily. Mr. Glenarm, your grandfather was certainly an enthusiast. I met him several times, though he was a trifle hard to meet!"—and the clergyman smiled.

"My grandfather had his whims; but he was a fine, generous-hearted old gentleman," I said.

"You haven't been on our side of the wall yet? Well, I promise not to molest your hidden treasure if you'll be neighborly," and he laughed merrily.

"I fear there's a big joke involved in the hidden treasure," I replied. "I'm so busy staying at home to guard it that I have no time for social recreation."

He looked at me quickly to see whether I was joking. His eyes were steady and earnest. The Reverend Paul Stoddard impressed me more and more agreeably. There was a suggestion of quiet strength about him that drew me to him.

"I suppose every one about here thinks of nothing but that I'm at Glenarm to earn my inheritance. My residence here must look pretty sordid from the outside."

"Mr. Glenarm's will is a matter of record in the county, of course. But you are too hard on yourself. It's nobody's business if your grandfather wished to visit his whims on you. I should say, in my own case, that I don't consider it any of my business what you are here for. I didn't come over to annoy you or to pry into your affairs. I get lonely now and then and thought I'd like to establish neighborly relations."

"Thank you; I appreciate your coming very much,"—and my heart warmed under the manifest kindness of the man.

"And I hope"—he spoke for the first time with restraint—"I hope nothing will prevent your knowing Sister Theresa and Miss Devereux. They are interesting and charming—the only women about here of your own social status."

My liking for him abated slightly. He might be a detective, representing the alternative heir, for all I knew and possibly Sister Theresa was a party to the conspiracy to drive me away.

"In time, no doubt, in time, I shall know them," I answered evasively.

"Oh, quite as you like!"—and he changed the subject. We talked of many things—of outdoor sports, with which he showed great familiarity, of universities, of travel and adventure. Columbia was his alma mater, but he had spent two years at Oxford.

"Well," he exclaimed, "this has been very pleasant, but I must run. I have just been over to see Morgan, the caretaker, at the resort village. The poor fellow accidentally shot himself yesterday cleaning his gun or something of that sort, and he has an ugly hole in his arm that will shut him up for a month or worse. He gave me an errand to do for him. He's a conscientious fellow and wished me to wire for him to Mr. Pickering that he'd been hurt, but was attending to his duties. Pickering owns a house at the farther end of the colony and Morgan has charge of it. You know Pickering, of course?"

I looked my clerical neighbor straight in the eye, a trifle coldly, perhaps. I was wondering why Morgan, with whom I had enjoyed a duel in my own cellar only a few hours before, should be reporting his injury to Arthur Pickering.

"I think I have seen Morgan about here," I said.

"Oh, yes! He's a woodsman and a hunter—our Nimrod of the lake."

"A good sort, very likely!"

"I dare say. He has sometimes brought me ducks during the season."

"To be sure! They shoot ducks at night—those Hoosier hunters—so I hear!"

He laughed as he shook himself into his greatcoat.

"That's possible, though unsportsmanlike. But we don't have to look a gift mallard in the eye."

We laughed together. It was easy to laugh with him.

"By the way, I forgot to get Pickering's address from Morgan. If you happen to have it—"

"With pleasure," I said. "Alexis Building, Broadway, New York."

"Good! That's easy to remember," he said, smiling and turning up his coat collar. "Don't forget me; I'm quartered in a hermit's cell back of the chapel, and I believe we can find many matters of interest to talk about."

"I'm confident of it," I said, glad of the sympathy and cheer that seemed to emanate from his stalwart figure.

I threw on my overcoat and walked to the gate with him and saw him hurry toward the village with long strides.

CHAPTER XII.

I Explore a Passage.

"Bates!"—I found him busy replenishing the candlesticks in the library,—it seemed to me that he was always poking about with an armful of candles,—"there are a good many queer things in this world, but I guess you're one of the queerest. I don't mind telling you that there are times when I think you a thoroughly bad lot, and then again I question my judgment and don't give you credit for being much more than a doddering fool."

He was standing under a ladder beneath the great crystal chandelier and looked down upon me with that patient inquiry that is so appealing in a dog—in, say, the eyes of an Irish setter, when you accidentally step on his tail.

"Yes, Mr. Glenarm," he replied humbly.

"Now, I want you to grasp this idea that I'm going to dig into this old shell top and bottom; I'm going to blow it up with dynamite, if I please; and if I catch you spying on me or reporting my doings to my enemies, or engaging in any questionable performances whatever, I'll hang you between the posts out there in the school wall—do you understand?—so that the sweet Sisters of St. Agatha and the dear little school girls and the chaplain and all the rest will shudder through all their lives at the very thought of you."

"Certainly, Mr. Glenarm,"—and his tone was the same he would have used if I had asked him to pass me the matches, and under my breath I consigned him to the hardest tortures of the fiery pit.

"Now, as to Morgan—"

"Yes, sir."

"What possible business do you suppose he has with Mr. Pickering?" I demanded.

"Why, sir, that's clear enough. Mr. Pickering owns a house up the lake,—he got it through your grandfather. Morgan has the care of it, sir."

"Very plausible, indeed!"—and I sent him off to his work.

After luncheon I went to the end of the corridor, and began to sound the walls. They were as solid as rock, and responded dully to the strokes of the hammer. I sounded them on both sides, retracing my steps to the stairway, becoming more and more impatient at my ill-luck or stupidity. There was every reason why I should know my own house, and yet a stranger and an outlaw ran through it with amazing daring.

After an hour's idle search I returned to the end of the corridor, repeated all my previous soundings, and, I fear, indulged in language unbecoming a gentleman. Then, in my blind anger, I found what patient search had not disclosed.

I threw the hammer from me in a fit of temper and it struck one of the square blocks in the cement floor which gave forth a hollow sound. I was on my knees in an instant, my fingers searching the cracks, and drawing down close I could feel a current of air, slight but unmistakable, against my face.

The cement square, though exactly like the others in the cellar floor, was evidently only an imitation, with an opening beneath.

The block was fitted into its place with a nicety that certified to the skill of the hand that had adjusted it. I broke a blade of my pocket-knife trying to pry it up, but, in a moment, I succeeded, and found it to be in reality a trap door, hinged to the substantial part of the floor.

A current of cool, fresh air, the same that had surprised me in the night, struck my face as I lay flat and peered into the opening. The lower passage was as black as pitch, and I lighted a lantern I had brought with me, found that wooden steps gave safe conduct below and went down.

I stood erect in the passage and had several inches to spare. It extended both ways, running back under the foundations of the house, and cut squarely under the park before the house and toward the school wall. The air grew steadily fresher, until, after I had gone about two hundred yards, I reached a point where the wind seemed to beat down on me from above. I put up my hands and found two openings about three yards apart, through which the air sucked steadily. I moved out of the current with a chuckle in my throat and a grin on my face. I had passed under the gate in the school wall, and I knew now why the piers that held it had been built so high,—they were hollow and were the means of sending fresh air into the tunnel.

When I had traveled about twenty yards more I felt a slight vibration accompanied by a muffled roar, and almost immediately came to a rough wooden stair that marked the end of the passage. I had no means of judging directions, but I assumed that I was well within the school park.

I climbed the steps and in a moment stood blinking, my lantern in hand, in a small, floored room. Overhead the tumult and thunder of an organ explained the tremor and roar I had heard below. I was in the crypt of St. Agatha's chapel. The inside of the door by which I had entered was a part of the wainscoting of the room, and the opening was wholly covered with a map of the Holy Land.

It was all very strange and interesting. I looked at my watch and found that it was five o'clock, but I resolved to go into the chapel before going home.

The way up was clear enough, and I was soon in the vestibule. I opened the door, expecting to find a service in progress; but the little church was empty save where, at the right of the chancel, an organist was filling the church with the notes of an exultant march. Cap in hand I stole forward, and sank down in one of the pews.

A lamp over the organ keyboard gave the only light in the chapel, and made an aureole about her head,—about the uncovered head of Olivia Gladys Armstrong! I smiled as I recognized her and smiled, too, as I remembered her name. But the joy she brought to the music, the happiness in her face as she raised it in the minor harmonies, her isolation, marked by the little isle of light against the dark background of the choir,—these things touched and moved me, and I bent forward, my arms upon the pew in front of me, watching and listening with a kind of awed wonder.

There was no pause in the outpouring of the melody. She changed stops and manuals with swift fingers and passed from one composition to another; now it was an august hymn, now a theme from Wagner, and finally Mendelssohn's spring song won the cold, dark chapel to light and warmth with its exultant notes.

She ceased suddenly with a little sigh and struck her hands together, for the place was cold. As she reached up to put out the lights I stepped forward to the chancel steps.

"Please allow me to do that for you?"

She turned toward me, gathering a cape about her.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" she asked, looking about quickly. "I don't remember that you were invited."

"I didn't know I was coming myself," I remarked truthfully, lifting my hand to the lamp.

"That is my opinion of you,—that you're a rather unexpected person. But thank you, very much."

She showed no disposition to prolong the interview, but hurried toward the door, and reached the vestibule before I came up with her.

"You can't go any farther, Mr. Glenarm," she said, and waited as though to make sure I understood. Straight before us through the wood and beyond the school buildings the sunset faded sullenly. Night was following fast upon the gray twilight and already the bolder planets were aflame in the sky. The path led straight ahead beneath the black boughs.

"I might perhaps walk to the dormitory, or whatever you call it," I said.

"Thank you, no! I'm late and haven't time to bother with you. It's against the rules, you know, for us to receive visitors."

She stepped out upon the path.

"But I'm not a caller; I'm just a neighbor! And I owe you several calls, anyhow."

She laughed but did not pause and I followed a pace behind her.

"I hope you don't think for a moment that I chased a rabbit on your side of the fence in the hope of meeting you, do you, Mr. Glenarm?"

"Be it far from me! I'm glad I came, though, for I liked your music immensely. I'm in earnest; I think it quite wonderful, Miss Armstrong."

She paid no heed to me.

"And I hope I may promise myself the pleasure of hearing you often."

"You are very kind about my poor music, Mr. Glenarm; but as I'm going away—"

I felt my heart sink a trifle. She was the only amusing person I had met at Glenarm, and the thought of losing her gave a darker note to the bleak landscape.

"That's really too bad! And just when we were getting acquainted! And I was coming to church Sunday to hear you play and to pray for snow, so you'd come over often to chase rabbits!"

This, I thought, softened her heart. At any rate her tone changed.

"I don't play for services; they're afraid to let me for fear I'd run comic opera tunes into the Te Deum!"

"How shocking!"

"Do you know, Mr. Glenarm,"—her tone became confidential and her pace slackened,—"we call you the squire, at St. Agatha's, and the lord of the manor, and names like that! All the girls are perfectly crazy about you. They'd be wild if they thought I talked with you, clandestinely,—is that the way you pronounce it?"

"Anything you say and any way you say it satisfies me," I replied.

"That's ever so nice of you," she said, mockingly again.

I felt foolish and guilty. She would probably get roundly scolded if the grave sisters learned of her talks with me, and very likely I should win their hearty contempt. But I did not turn back.

"I hope the reason you're leaving isn't—" I hesitated.

"Ill conduct? Oh, yes; I'm terribly wicked, Squire Glenarm! They're sending me off."

"Oh Yes, I'm Terribly Wicked, Squire Glenarm."

"But I suppose the Sisters are awfully strict."

"They're hideous,—perfectly hideous."

"Where is your home?" I demanded. "Chicago, Louisville, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, perhaps?"

"Humph, you are dull! You ought to know from my accent that I'm not from Chicago. And I hope I haven't a Kentucky girl's air of waiting to be flattered to death. And no Indianapolis girl would talk to a strange man at the edge of a deep wood in the gray twilight of a winter day,—that's from a book; and the Cincinnati girl is without my elan, esprit,—whatever you please to call it. She has more Teutonic repose,—more Gretchen of the Rhine valley about her. Don't you adore French, Squire Glenarm?" she concluded, breathlessly, and with no pause in her quick step.

"I adore yours, Miss Armstrong," I asserted, yielding myself further to the joy of idiocy, and delighting in the mockery and whimsical moods of her talk. I did not make her out; indeed, I preferred not to! I was not then,—and I am not now, thank God!—of an analytical turn of mind. And as I grow older I prefer, even after many a blow, to take my fellow human beings as I find them. And as for women, old or young, I envy no man his gift of resolving them into elements. As well carry a spray of arbutus to the laboratory or subject the enchantment of moonlight upon running water to the flame and blow-pipe as try to analyze the heart of a girl,—particularly a girl who paddles a canoe with a sure stroke and puts up a good race with a rabbit.

A lamp shone ahead of us at the entrance of one of the houses, and lights appeared in all the buildings.

"If I knew your window I should certainly sing under it,—except that you're going home! You didn't tell me why they were deporting you."

"I'm really ashamed to! You would never—"

"Oh, yes, I would; I'm really an old friend!" I insisted, feeling more like an idiot every minute.

"Well, don't tell! But they caught me flirting—with the grocery boy! Now aren't you disgusted!"

"Thoroughly! I can't believe it! Why, you'd a lot better flirt with me," I suggested boldly.

"Well, I'm to be sent away for good at Christmas. I may come back then if I can square myself. My! That's slang,—isn't it adorable?"

"The Sisters don't like slang, I suppose?"

"They loathe it! Miss Devereux,—you know who she is!—she spies on us and tells."

"You don't say so; but I'm not surprised at her! I've heard about her!" I declared bitterly.

We had reached the door, and I expected her to fly; but she lingered.

"Oh, if you know her! Perhaps you're a spy, too! It's just as well we should never meet again, Mr. Glenarm," she declared haughtily.

"The memory of these few meetings will always linger with me, Miss Armstrong," I returned in an imitation of her own tone.

"I shall scorn to remember you!"—and she folded her arms under the cloak tragically.

"Our meetings have been all to few, Miss Armstrong. Two, exactly, I believe!"

"Then you prefer to ignore the first time I ever saw you," she said, her hand on the door.

"Out there in your canoe? Never! And you've forgiven me for overhearing you and the chaplain on the wall—please!"

She grasped the knob of the door and paused an instant as though pondering.

"I make it three times, without that one, and not counting once in the road and other times when you didn't know, Squire Glenarm! I'm a foolish little girl to have remembered the first. I see now how b-l-i-n-d I have been. Good-by!"

She opened and closed the door softly, and I heard her running up the steps within.

I ran back to the chapel, roundly abusing myself for having neglected my more serious affairs for a bit of silly talk with a school girl, fearful lest the openings I had left at both ends of the passage should have been discovered. Near the chapel I narrowly escaped running into Stoddard, but I slipped past him, found my lantern, pulled the hidden door into place, and, traversing the tunnel without incident, soon climbed through the hatchway and slammed the false block securely into the opening.

(To Be Continued.)